Learning from Picture Book Characters in Readaloud Sessions for Students with ADHD

Debby M. Zambo

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Abstract

Students with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder are physically active and impulsive often to the point of being difficult to contain. Fortunately, advances in research and practice are helping unravel some of the mysteries of ADHD and with this information comes an imperative to inform individuals with ADHD about their disability. Self-awareness is important because it can be the first step in eliminating many of the negative perceptions and expectations students with disabilities develop about themselves.This article provides a strategy to help elementary students with ADHD understand themselves and their behaviors through picture book characters in readaloud sessions. The author provides a rationale for using picture books based on reading theory, bibliotherapy, and Albert Bandura's social-learning theory; provides strategies to make readaloud sessions more conducive for students with ADHD; and supplies titles of books that can be used.

Introduction

Before I came to work at the university, I taught K–4 students who had emotional problems. I typically had between 10 and 12 students in my self-contained class and many of them had attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), in addition to emotional difficulties. Some were on medication for their ADHD and others were not and as a result, life was never dull. I enjoyed the creativity and energy that my students exhibited and worked hard to help them achieve their academic objectives as well as their social and emotional goals. One way I met these challenges was by using picture books in readaloud sessions that I adapted for my students' activity level and needs. I used picture books because I knew they had cognitive value. I knew that hearing books read out loud could improve my students' vocabulary, understanding of story structure, and listening skills. But my readalouds had an additional purpose. I used them to help my students understand themselves and their behaviors. For example, I used the book *Waiting for Mr. Goose* (Lears, 1999) to help my students understand that there is a difference between an acceptable activity level for the classroom and one outside of school and that being still, quiet, and patient are skills sometimes needed to get what one wants.

I chose to read *Waiting for Mr. Goose* (Lears, 1999) because Stephen, its main character, was a lot like my students in terms of ability, looks, dialect, and gender and because he had ADHD. I also chose the book because its illustrations were simple and clear. They visually depicted Stephen's emotions and behavior challenges.

Readalouds in my classroom were adapted to the needs of my students. They were short in duration (15 – 20 minutes), had

a routine, and always occurred in the same physical space. My readaloud sessions usually took place just before a transition (e.g., lunch, specials) and occurred in the reading corner, a quiet area that contained a small sofa, a few beanbag chairs, pillows, soft blankets, and an abundant supply of stuffed animals. When I read to my students, I read with expression, using a soft and quiet voice, and stopped at predetermined pages to discuss the challenges that the character faced. My goal was to use the picture book character as a role model to help my students understand appropriate behaviors. In my readaloud sessions, I tried to make connections between the challenges that a picture book character was facing and the challenges that my students faced.

After readaloud sessions were completed, I always placed the book in the Book of the Day spot so my students could read it later. I also referred throughout the day to ideas that we had discussed as we read the book. The school psychologist and I communicated often and he was always glad to reread my chosen story and discuss it with my students when he did a group session. Using picture books in my classroom helped many of my students with ADHD understand themselves, their emotions, and the social and behavioral challenges that they faced.

Understanding Students with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder

Students who have an attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder are physically active, curious, social, and talkative often to the point of being difficult to contain. To diagnose children with ADHD, the American Psychiatric Association (2000) has established indicators and these include: not paying close attention and missing details, lack of impulse control, and hyperactivity. Students

with ADHD tend to blurt out answers instead of waiting their turn, have difficulty focusing on schoolwork for extended periods of time, and often fail to complete tasks they are assigned (Friend & Bursuk, 1996).

It is estimated that as many as 2 million (3 to 5 percent) of all school-aged children have been diagnosed as ADHD and these numbers are rising because of increased awareness and better diagnosis (Rothenberger & Banaschewski, 2004). ADHD is no longer thought of as only a childhood condition because 30 to 50 percent of individuals diagnosed with ADHD continue to have symptoms well into adulthood (Hardman, Drew, & Egan, 2002). In addition, two-thirds of individuals who have ADHD also have coexisting conditions such as learning disabilities, depressive and anxiety disorders, conduct disorder, bi-polar disorder, or antisocial behavior (Kavale & Forness, 2003). Due to this co-morbidity, services are sometimes provided to students with ADHD under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) under various categories like "other health impaired," "emotionally disturbed," or "learning disabled." But beyond giving a child a label is the fact that students with ADHD are different biologically, and this difference often causes social and psychological pain (Kaplan, 2000). Students with ADHD have difficulty controlling their impulses and getting along with others and because of this, their peers often reject them (National Research Counsel Institute of Medicine, 2000). Add other environmental factors like impatient teachers to the situation, and one can come to understand why children with ADHD experience so many problems in so many ways (Hardman, et al., 2002). Like all students, students with ADHD want to be accepted, but their bodies and minds are abuzz with energy and distractions that make it difficult for them to form friendships and difficult for teachers to understand their needs (National Research Counsel Institute of Medicine, 2000).

Children with ADHD are energetic and impulsive, and this presents a substantial challenge for teachers who must instruct and manage their behavior in a classroom. Teachers describe children with ADHD as fidgety, distracting, and disruptive because they demand so much time and energy to keep them focused and on task (Barkley, 1998). When there are multiple students with ADHD in a classroom, teachers may come to feel overwhelmed and this may cause them to focus on students' weaknesses instead of on their strengths. When this happens day-in and day-out it can form a vicious cycle of negative feelings and thoughts in a teacher's mind. It can also lead students with ADHD to feel hurt, rejected, isolated, and different from their peers. When this happens, they develop a low self-concept and low self-esteem ("Emotion and Cognition", 2004; Henker & Whaler, 1999). Fortunately, much has been discovered about effective interventions to meet their needs.

Social-Learning Theory

The National Institutes of Health (1998) suggests that behavior management be part of a multimodal treatment plan for students with ADHD. In most classrooms, behavioral plans focus on external factors, like antecedents and consequences, and their effect on observable behaviors. Many teachers of students with special needs implement behavioral strategies in their classrooms. They create token economies, develop contingency contracts, and use time out. Albert Bandura (1977, 2001) felt that behavioral plans are important but incomplete, and he expanded behavioral ideas to include the influence of

social and cognitive factors on learning and motivation. Bandura's social-learning theory is applicable to students with disabilities and provides a rational for inclusion. Students with special needs are mainstreamed in regular education classrooms because being in this setting affords them an opportunity to observe and learn from role models without disabilities and they themselves become role models for students in general education. Students with disabilities, like all others, need to be exposed to role models who display an interest in academic achievement, appropriate behavior, and motivation. Despite providing a rationale for the placement of students with special needs in mainstream classrooms, little has been written on how to use social-learning theory with students with ADHD.

Learning from Models

Most teachers know that students learn from role models because they see it in the classroom everyday. Students comb their hair in crazy hairdos, pierce and tattoo their bodies in painful ways, and use language they have heard on television and in their favorite songs. Students learn from others by watching and imitating what they do. Learning from models comes naturally to children and most of the models they learn from are live models – real people they can actually see and hear. In the classroom, students learn by watching their peers, their teacher, and visitors who come into the classroom. But children also learn from symbolic models and these models can be real or fictional characters portrayed in picture books (Bandura, 2001).

A first step to making the connection between social-learning theory and children with ADHD is to understand the theory and to understand the child. To do this, teachers

must examine both in-child factors and in-model factors.

In-child factors

To learn from a model, whether real or symbolic, students must be able to focus their attention, remember what the model did, and be motivated to perform it (Bandura, 1977). Learning from models can be beneficial, but there are a few things teachers must keep in mind when using models with students with ADHD because these children have difficulty focusing and maintaining their attention, controlling their impulses, executing fine motor skills, problem solving, organizing, and planning ahead (Barkley, 1998). These limitations make it necessary to take students' strengths and weaknesses into consideration and provide scaffolding and support if it is needed. Asking children with ADHD to sit for long periods to observe a model is unrealistic. Providing short periods of instruction, using multiple modes of input, and making the environment conducive to their needs is important. It is also important to be aware of the behaviors that children are expected to perform. Students with ADHD may have difficulty executing some skills perfectly, consistently, or smoothly and because of this, it is important to break tasks down, accept approximations, and allow plenty of time for practice with specific feedback.

One final in-child factor that should be considered when asking students to learn from models is that students must possess high self-efficacy, or believe that they are capable of performing the action. Self-efficacy beliefs are strong predictors of whether or not a child will perform a desired behavior because children like to perform actions they are good at doing (Pintrich & Shunk, 2002). Bandura (1997) notes that self-efficacy comes

from three sources. It comes from mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, and social persuasion. Mastery experiences arise from direct experiences of success and these are the most powerful motivators a teacher can supply. Success breeds success as the saying goes and students who are asked to perform tasks that they can accomplish are more likely to become intrinsically motivated. Students also gain self-efficacy from vicarious experience, or when they see models gain rewards or punishment for behaviors they perform. Listening to a story in which a character is rewarded for effort can convince students that they too will gain recognition if they put effort into a task. Likewise, listening to a story in which a character is punished for certain behaviors can deter students from performing those behaviors because they saw the character receive consequences for the act. A third way to build self-efficacy is through social persuasion. Students become persuaded to perform a behavior if the model is similar to themselves in terms of looks and ability. Seeing models similar to oneself overcoming difficulties can give students an "if they can do it, so can I" attitude.

In-model factors

A second factor that influences the learning from models is in the type of models that are portrayed. In order to persuade children to perform a behavior, models must also have status and power. Children must be able to relate to models, and models must be charismatic enough to convince students to make an effort, to try something new, and work hard to succeed (Bandura, 1997). A key thing to keep in mind when using models is to be sure that they display the behaviors you want students to learn and receive appropriate consequences. The next sections set these ideas in the context of picture books.

Students with ADHD and Picture Books

Fortunately, advances in research and practice are helping unravel some of the mysteries of ADHD and with this information comes an imperative to inform individuals with ADHD about ADHD. Informing students is important because self-awareness and understanding can be a first step in eliminating many of the negative perceptions and expectations students with disabilities develop about themselves ("Emotion and Cognition", 2004; Levine, 2002). Learning about ADHD can be beneficial for students' academic achievement, behavior, and motivation but students may tune out teachers if they try to inform them with dry lectures that contain abstractions or too much verbiage. Explanations for these children need to be clear, concrete, and without jargon. They need new information to be connected to their prior knowledge and to the everyday experiences and interests they have (National Research Council, 2000). Furthermore, instruction should be differentiated, meaning that it should be taught in a way that matches their ability level and learning mode. One method to accomplish this is to provide multisensory input (e.g., auditory, visual, kinesthetic) so that varied learning modes can be tapped (Gardner, 1993; Tomlinson, 2001). It also means making learning stimulating because students with ADHD are intelligent children who have active minds that crave excitement (Levine, 2002, Routman, 1994).

One strategy that can be used to help students with ADHD meet these goals and learn through social-learning theory is to use well-chosen picture books in readaloud sessions adapted specifically for students with ADHD. Readalouds are part of a balanced literacy program and this strategy has been proven to develop vocabulary and compre-

hension (Tompkins, 2006). Picture books are an appropriate readaloud tool because most teachers and elementary school students are familiar with them, enjoy them, and have access to them through their library (Temple, Martinez, Yokota, & Naylor, 2002). Picture books are cognitively stimulating and interesting because their stories are short and easy to read (Sipe, 2001). Picture books have universal appeal and allow teachers to make their point without lecture, provide clear and important information with little jargon, and advance reasoning and problem solving skills (Koc & Buzzelli, 2004).

Picture books are unique learning tools because they provide both words and images and these multiple modes of input tap varied learning styles (Gardner, 1993). Picture books provide a dual-coding of information and this helps with comprehension and retention of what children need to learn (Sadoski & Paivio, 2001). But beyond better input and memory, well-chosen picture books offer self-understanding and emotional support (Coon, 2004). Picture books have been used to help children face real-world problems and challenges, understand themselves, and cope with tragedies. Evidence of this comes from bibliotherapy, a technique used by counselors to help children face real-world problems and challenges, understand themselves, and cope with tragedies (Rudman, 1993). The value of literacy for therapeutic purposes has been shown by Riordan and Wilson (1989) who found bibliotherapy to be a successful adjunct therapy when used with counseling, social skills training, and behavioral support. Bibliotherapy is often successful because children identify with picture book characters and these characters become role models and problem solvers for them. The experiences of a picture book character can teach appropriate behaviors, illustrate how characters feel, and lead students to make connections to themselves. When students identify with characters they talk more openly about their feelings and discuss them in a constructive way (Ouzts, 1991). So even though readalouds may take away from direct instruction of academic skills their value is gained by the social and emotional support that they provide. The next section explains how a teacher can use picture books and adapt readloud sessions for students with ADHD.

Setting the Environment and Using Picture Books

Before Reading

1. Understand the strengths and weaknesses of the children by learning about their abilities and needs. For example, on their website, the Council for Exceptional Children offers lists of books and resources about ADHD.

2. Identify an issue of interest or importance to you and your students with ADHD. Issues may be behaviors of concern (Why can't this child walk in line without causing a disruption?), areas of interest to the child (Why do I have such a difficult time sitting still?), or issues of importance like comorbidity (Why do I struggle to read?).

3. Select a picture book with a character experiencing the same issues and concerns. Find a book that shows a character like the child in ability, disability, dialect, gender, and culture. Some books have animal characters and these are OK if students can identify with them in terms of their actions and thoughts. Also, carefully examine illustrations for clarity of facial and body expressions. Choose stories and illustrations that have the potential to encourage lively discussions, problem solving, and critical thinking skills.

4. Plan on sessions being short. Create structure and routine (same time, place).
5. Select an area and prepare it. Think about comfort – dim lights, select a quiet corner away from loud noises, blowing fans, and eye-catching distractions. Provide quiet props like stuffed animals, pillows, and soft blankets so children can get comfortable.

During Reading
1. Provide cues to gain attention ("All eyes on me.").
2. Position students with ADHD near the reader and allow them to stand (beside or behind) the reader instead of sit. Be sure they can see the words and pictures. Allow them to draw if they need to and provide opportunities for movement with breaks in the story (e.g., show me what the character did, use your face to show me how she looked).
3. Activate prior knowledge (e.g., "Look at this book's cover. What do you think it might be about? Have you ever felt this way? Has this ever happened to you?").
4. Read the story with expression yet in a quiet voice with a slow and steady pace.
5. Make clear, explicit connections between issues and concerns the character is facing and issues and concerns the students have.
6. Praise students profusely with specific feedback for listening and appropriate behavior. Boost self-esteem when possible. Remember that mastery experiences are powerful efficacy boosts and that a mastery experience can come from a readaloud.
7. Many authors of picture books have disabilities. For example, Patricia Pollaco struggled with reading through her elementary school years. Make these connections when possible so students can see that others with similar problems have overcome them successfully.

After Reading
1. Engage students in conversations about behaviors and feelings. Help them see connections between the character and themselves. Continue this throughout the day and week.
2. Encourage students to rehearse and practice skills and behaviors they learn. Supply plenty of specific, constructive feedback as they practice. Help them have mastery experiences.
3. Students with ADHD often miss things the first time around so reread books and repeat information. Encourage other individuals like the school psychologist or counselor to reread and extend ideas. Children enjoy listening to favorite stories and it is good for their vocabulary and fluency. The next section provides an example of a book that can be used with students to help them understand themselves.

Introducing Students to David
The book David Goes to School by David Shannon (1999) can be used to help students with ADHD vicariously experience the rewards and consequences of displaying certain behaviors at school. The story is simply written with few words on each page and it is very appropriate to use with students with ADHD because its main character, David, sounds and acts like many children with ADHD. David is inattentive, impulsive, and hyperactive, and his story illustrates the behavioral, social, and emotional difficulties David has to face. Teachers can use David to help students learn about attention and self-regulation. Specific examples include:

Inattention: David is inattentive and his teacher says, "Pay attention, David." David is so inattentive that he stays on the playground after the bell has rung ("David, recess is over!")

Impulsivity: David is impulsive. He leaves his seat at inappropriate times as noted on the page that says, "Sit down David!" He also blurts out answers ("David, raise your hand!") and cannot keep his hands to himself.

Hyperactivity: David has a lot of energy as evidenced by his difficulty waiting in the cafeteria line. David also shows preference for gross motor activities (banging his book with his pencil) rather than the fine motor skill of writing.

David's story allows students to vicariously experience his challenges and successes, his punishments and rewards. Students can talk about their experiences and teachers can remind students about David when they need to stop and think about their behavior. Figure 1 contains a list of more books and how teachers can use them to address issues of concern for students with ADHD. With a little creativity, ingenuity, and a good picture book, the possibilities are endless.

Figure 1: Picture Books and the Lessons They Can Teach Students with ADHD

Picture Book and Author	Issues of Concern
ADHD	
Eddie Enough by Debbie Zimmett	Stories about children with ADHD, their challenges, and victories.
Pay Attention, Slosh! by Mark Smith	
Waiting for Mr. Goose by Laurie Lears	
Learning and Behavior Problems	
Hooway for Wodney Wat by Helen Lester	A rat with a speech impediment beats a bully and becomes a hero.
Thank You, Mr. Falker by Patricia Polacco	A young girl experiences difficulty learning how to read and a very special teacher helps her overcome her difficulties.
Leo the Late Bloomer by Robert Kraus	Leo the lion is slow in developing his reading, writing, and language skills.
The Alphabet War by Diane Burton Robb	A story about a boy with dyslexia who is learning to read and the battle he has with letters and their sounds.
Today was a Terrible Day by Patricia Riley Giff	A boy experiences a bad day because of his reading challenges.
Mr. Lincoln's Way by Patricia Polacco	A boy with behavioral problems and the principal who helped him see his strengths.

Picture Book and Author	Issues of Concern
Being Different	
The Sneetches and Other Stories by Dr. Seuss	Illustrates the importance and celebration of differences.
Stand Tall, Molly Lou Melon by Pati Lovell	A girl with different looks conquers a bully and maintains her self-esteem.
Emotions	
Sometimes I'm Bombaloo by Rachael Vail	A story about anger and how to handle it inappropriately.
How are You Peeling?: Foods with Moods by Saxton Freeman and Joost Elffers	Helps children identify emotions on the faces of fruits and vegetables.
Believing in Yourself	
I Knew You Could: A Book for All the Stops in Your Life by Craig Dorfman	An encouraging tale based on the Little Engine that Could.

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